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ORIGINAL PAPER

Top-Down Civic Projects Are Not Grassroots Associations: How The Differences Matter in Everyday Life

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Abstract Research on civic associations blurs an important distinction between the unfunded, informal, ongoing associations that theorists like de Tocqueville described versus current participatory democracy projects that are funded by the state and large nongovernmental organizations, are open to all, and are usually short-term. Based on a long-term ethnography of youth programs in the United States, this paper shows that entities like these, which participants and researchers alike often called "volunteer" or "civic" groups, operate very differently from traditional civic groups. The ethnography systematically details prevalent tensions that actors face when they try to cultivate the civic spirit in these increasingly typical organizations.

Résumé La recherche sur les associations civiques estompe une distinction importante entre les associations actuelles non-subventionnées, informelles, que les théoriciens comme de Tocqueville décrivent par opposition aux projets de la démocratie participative présente qui sont subventionnés par l'état et les grandes organisations non gouvernementales, sont ouverts à tous, et sont habituellement à court terme. Basé sur une ethnographie à long terme des programmes de la jeunesse aux Etats-Unis, cet article montre que ces entités, que les participants et chercheurs aiment souvent appeler groupes « bénévoles » ou « civiques », opèrent très différemment des groupes civiques traditionnels. L'ethnographie détaille systématiquement les tensions courantes que les protagonistes rencontrent lorsqu'ils essaient de cultiver l'esprit civique dans ces organisations de plus en plus typiques.

Zusammenfassung Forschungsarbeit über Bürgervereinigungen verwischt einen wichtigen Unterschied zwischen den nicht finanzierten, informellen, permanenten

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Vereinigungen, die Theoretiker wie de Tocqueville beschrieben haben, und den gegenwärtigen Projekten „mitbestimmende Demokratie“, die vom Staat und großen nichtstaatlichen Organisationen finanziert werden, allen offen stehen und gewöhnlich befristet sind. Basierend auf einer langfristigen ethnographischen Studie über Jugendprogramme in den USA zeigt dieser Artikel, dass die Organisationen, die sowohl von Teilnehmern als auch von Forscher oft als “freiwillige” oder “Bürger”-Gruppen genannt werden, ganz anders als traditionelle Bürgergruppen operieren. Die ethnografische Studie detailliert systematisch allgemein vorhandene Spannungen, denen Akteure gegenüberstehen, wenn sie versuchen, Bürgerstolz in diesen zunehmend typischen Organisationen zu kultivieren.

Resumen Los estudios sobre las asociaciones cívicas cuestionan la importante distinción entre las asociaciones actuales, informales y sin financiación que describían teóricos como De Tocqueville frente a los actuales proyectos democráticos participativos que están financiados por el estado y las grandes organizaciones no gubernamentales, que están abiertos a todos y son a corto plazo. Basado en un estudio etnográfico a largo plazo de los programas juveniles en los Estados Unidos, este trabajo demuestra que las entidades como éstas¯que los participantes y los investigadores suelen llamar grupos «cívicos» o «de voluntarios»¯ funcionan de manera muy distinta a como lo hacían los tradicionales grupos cívicos. El estudio etnográfico detalla sistemáticamente las tensiones dominantes que afrontan los actores cuando intentan cultivar el espíritu cívico en estas organizaciones cada vez más típicas.

Keywords Participatory democracy Civic associations Hybrid governance Empowerment Volunteering United States

Introduction

In the picture painted by most current social science literature on “civic associations,” “volunteers,” and “participatory democracy,” there is a strange blur right in the middle of the canvas: European and American researchers alike refer to top-down, funded projects as “civic associations,” and call the people who populate them “volunteers.” This paper clarifies important differences between old-fashioned voluntary associations and these newly prevalent projects that are top-down, funded, open to any members of the public, and usually short-term. This is not simply an exercise in creating precise definitions and splitting hairs. It matters for anyone—theorist, researcher, or policy-maker—who wants to understand how these newly prevalent organizations work. It helps us see what they can do easily, what they can do only with great difficulty, and why this is so. Without specifying these distinctions, we risk demanding these organizations to do things that they cannot do, and ignoring what they do well. Participants themselves easily recognize them, and quickly learn how to “do” civicness in them, what is easy to do, and what cannot be done in them. It is time for social researchers to catch up.

Using a four and a half year ethnographic study of a set of youth programs in "Snowy Prairie,"[1] a mid-sized, Midwestern American city, I argue that civicness materializes, in rather different ways, in these two different kinds of organizations: the "classic voluntary association" (Hustinx 2001) versus the contemporary entity that I term the "empowerment project" (1999–2004). The after-school and evening programs described here were a loose network of about 100 youth organizations in a mid-sized city. As a participant-observer, I volunteered in, while studying, several of these but focused mainly on Community House, Casa Latino, and The Regional Youth Empowerment Project for this paper.

Community House is a free after-school program for helping underprivileged youth, ages 5–18, do their homework and have a safe place to go in the afternoon. Community House used many adult volunteers. The school day in the US ends in the early afternoon, and the state does not provide universal, free after-school—or summertime—activities. If disadvantaged children are to be supervised at all, enterprising paid organizers of after-school and summer programs like Community House have to ferret out government, corporate and NGO grants, and private donations, and enlist adult volunteers to help them. Casa Latino is a program like Community House except that members were Spanish-speaking immigrants. The Regional Youth Empowerment Project is a regional "community service" program that brought many Community House members to evening meetings, where they would design and implement volunteer projects, working shoulder-to-shoulder with youth volunteers from more affluent backgrounds—the youth volunteers who were from more affluent backgrounds came partly because they wanted to do improve the world, and partly for a reason that is peculiar to the US: acceptance at a good university is not automatic, even for those with money; prospective students have to write essays that display and document their good character, and having done volunteer work is a clear sign of that, so it is nearly mandatory, and in many high schools, it is mandatory.

While the American state has, for a long time, operated through local nonprofits in a kind of "hybrid" balance between "state" and "civic association" (Hall 1992), hybrid organizations' growth has skyrocketed in the past 30 years, both in the US and around the world (Salamon 1995). By "hybrid," I mean, following Hall, that the state operates in partnership with organizations that are not part of the state—especially organizations whose primary goal is not profit-making. In other words, instead of operating through a distant, central government, providers of social services like these "hybrid" youth programs operate through a dizzy array of semi-civic, semi-private, semi-state agencies; they do so by trying to evoke local grassroots participation and to make the recipients of aid—whether they be youth, poor people, disabled people, or others—into active participants in their own care.

Thus, along with these organizations' hybrid *conditions* has developed a standard set of *justifications* that such organizations invoke—a constellation of stories that they tell about what they do, about why their work is good, and how their organization is like or different from similar organizations. They aim: to promote

[1] All names of people, places, and organizations have been changed to preserve members' confidentiality.

grassroots, local, multicultural, inclusive and open, participatory, empowering, egalitarian, personalized, voluntary community; to promote cultural diversity, options and choices, "breaking out of boxes" and "stretching your comfort zone"; and, not to be bureaucratic, hierarchical, or reliant on experts, not "top down" but letting "gut feelings' spontaneously bubble from the "bottom up." As such, we can call these organizations "empowerment projects," and the typical set of justifications that they invoke "empowerment talk": they use empowerment talk and were funded by the state, large nongovernmental organizations, private donors, and some corporations.

Several recent ethnographies of similar projects in France (Carrel 2004; Hamidi 2006; Talpin 2006), Belgium (Berger 2009), Italy (Merico 2008), Albania (Sampson 1996), Canada (Phillips and Graham 2000), and Egypt (Elyachar 2001), among other places, show similar tensions to the ones that this US case reveals—tensions that clearly distinguish them from old-fashioned volunteer groups. This "organizational model" of governance is diffusing widely (Bode 2006; Dekker 2004; Ullman 1998). Of course, there are important variations among different empowerment projects, both within and between different countries (Hupe et al. 2000), but there is good reason to call them all the same name, and to distinguish them clearly from classic civic or voluntary associations.

"Civic" as an Adverb

"Civic" is best used as an adverb; people can speak and act "civicly" in organizations that neither participants nor social researchers typically consider "civic." Can we, however, expect different kinds of organizations to present different typical opportunities for, and obstacles to, civil solidarity? Are there certain places in which it is more possible or easier to act "civicly" than others? Following Eliasoph, Lichterman, and Cefai (forthcoming; and see Dekker and Evers in this issue), I define "civic" action as action in which participants in an ongoing group collectively discover, and work on solving, shared problems, claiming to act on behalf of some collective identity, to create some good that they define as a public one. In the process, they might actively reinvent their mode of coordinating action.

In contrast to definitions that describe the "civic sector" as "not market, not state, not family" (Wolfe 1989), our definition leaves open the possibility that people can act and speak civicly in all sorts of organizations. In contrast to other definitions of "civic," ours does not treat "the civil sphere" as a tidy list of organizations, but as a way of doing things and talking about them together (Alexander 2006). The question, then, is how people can speak and act civicly in different types of organizations, with their typical constraints?

To understand this, we need to theorize organizations more precisely than theorists who divide the world into "sectors" or spheres, such as Wolfe's state, market, family, and civic; beyond saying that bureaucracies are governed by rules, families by eternal love, businesses by money, and civic associations by solidarity. Just to take the bureaucracy example: since Alvin Gouldner (1956), social

researchers have been arguing that rules do not tell actors what to do. Rather, they tell people how to justify action. Just because they are in a state agency or a market does not mean that people cannot speak and act civicly; when workers claim "rights," for example, or when people try to do "socially responsible" commerce, they speak and act civicly in a market setting; or when states try to create civic associations from the top-down, they speak and act civicly inside a "state" setting. People can speak and act "civicly" anywhere. So, is it just complete mix and match, with civicness unfolding the same way, with equal ease, in any kind of organization? No, that is not correct, either. The point is to understand how civicness materializes differently, in different kinds of organizations.

It makes sense that civicness comes out differently in the conditions of an empowerment project. As Smith (1997) persuasively argues, we should assume that we will find big differences between the ways that "grassroots associations" work and the ways that other kinds of organization work, even if social scientists tend to give them all the same name. Ethnographic research is best suited for revealing these differences, as they play out in practice.

Tensions for Civic Action in Classic Voluntary Associations

In the American social imaginary, civic action is something that volunteer groups do. The volunteer is a potent, almost sacred symbol in American life: it is hard for Americans to imagine a bad volunteer (Beem 1999; Henkel and Stirrat 2001; Kateb 1992; Stout 2003; Wuthnow 1998). Though it is hard for Americans to imagine a bad volunteer, old-fashioned, classic voluntary associations share a set of well-documented characteristics, some of which are not quite as beneficent as common sense imagines. Let us review some of these issues.

Paternalistic Distance Between Server and Served

First, classic voluntary associations tend to attract people from relatively privileged classes, because such people tend to feel more confident in their abilities to participate—to chair a meeting, for example—than their less educated or economically advantaged counterparts (Verba et al. 1995). In the classic voluntary association of yore there was a common danger: when volunteers aimed to aid the needy, it often came with a kind of noblesse oblige and pity for "the poor dears" (Addams 2002; Daniels 1988), as the volunteer—who was usually more privileged than the person they served—stooped down to help the needy.

No Need for Transparency or Expertise

Second, classic volunteer groups do not have to account to anyone beyond their own members. They can serve the wealthy, if they want, when, for example, homeowners' associations in affluent neighborhoods try to keep low-income housing far away; they are not accountable to a broader public. The positive side of this can be that the organization can start with one goal and later change it in the

course of action; participants can learn by doing, in an open-ended process of discovery (Dewey 1926).

Personal Familiarity and Lack of Diversity

Third, classic voluntary associations do not need to be inclusive. They can be based on a shared religion, ethnicity, or cultural tradition. Empirically, they tend to be socially homogeneous, because people join organizations through their social networks, acquaintances bringing acquaintances (McPherson and Rotolo 1996; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). Such groups might become exclusive and narrow, or might defend only their very private interests at the expense of others. These were, of course, the original fears of certain leaders of the French and American democracies' early years (it was the winning side in France; losing side of the Federalism debate in the US). They can even be based on bigotry and racism (Kaufman 2002). The positive side of this can be that people in old-fashioned volunteer group do not have to expose themselves to discomfort (Schudson 1997); participation in them can be based on feelings of comfort that cannot be explained to distant outsiders.

Disconnection from Politics and Institutions

Fourth, as Lichterman (2005) points out, classic volunteer groups do not always, despite de Tocqueville's hopes, "spiral outwards" to a virtuous circle of concern. To keep a feeling of efficacy afloat, members may try to narrow their concern to issues that they consider "do-able" and "not political" (Eliasoph 1996).

Hence, in these four well-documented ways, classic voluntary associations do not necessarily promote the kind of "civicness" that we might hope that they promote. Their shortcomings make sense, given their purely voluntary, private, and unregulated, semi-domestic conditions. Civicness is, then, a promise that never can be completely fulfilled, *even in organizations that are called civic*. Like the other spheres, the civic sphere makes promises that cannot be met: equal chances to compete in the market, unconditional love in all families, strict adherence to just rules in a state. The promises cannot be met, but they organize people's hopes and expectations of what is good and possible. Without these promises, people cannot coordinate action together—even if no institution ever fulfills them (Alexander 2006; Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). The moral expectations are real, and patterned; realizing them always involves a translation. Civicness always involves a translation, even in organizations that we would clearly name "civic."

Tensions for Civic Action in Empowerment Projects

As empowerment projects, the youth programs tended to have a different set of challenges and opportunities from classic voluntary associations. Here, the following points can be made.

Empowerment versus Fulfilling Needs

In contrast to classic voluntary associations' potential creation and reproduction of distance between server and served, part of how hybrid social service agencies serve the needy is by making the needy themselves become active volunteers, aiming to empower the recipient of aid, to make them "civic" equals rather than condescendingly serving them. Empowering recipients of aid, in turn, causes tensions.

Transparency for Distant Audiences versus Comfortable Familiarity

In contrast to classic voluntary associations' lack of accountability, hybrid organizations have to please multiple, often distant, usually hurried audiences—potential volunteers, funding agencies, voters, policy-makers, private donors, and others. These empowerment projects needed to prove, to all these audiences that they were genuinely grassroots. There had to be short time horizons, so that the organizations would not become stale, "entrenched bureaucracies," to quote organizers' frequent words. In the youth programs, all of the transparency translated into constant documenting—hours spent volunteering, numbers of youth volunteers, numbers of adult volunteers helping the projects, numbers of youth served. This transparency, in turn, causes tensions.

Diversity versus Working as Equals

In contrast to voluntary associations' comfortable social homogeneity, hybrid organizations must be inclusive. The organizations in this study were, indeed, more socially diverse, partly because exclusion would have been illegal, and no doubt partly because workplaces in general tend to be more socially diverse, but also partly because organizers were committed to "diversity" as a keystone to their organizations' success, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of funders. A commitment to promoting cultures, and to multicultural diversity, was also at the core of organizers' inspiration for working long hours at low pay. The hybrid organizations' openness and diversity, in turn, causes tensions.

Connection to Policy, Politics, and Institutions

In contrast to classic volunteer groups' relative ease in avoiding politics, members of hybrid organizations have to discuss the policies that fund their organizations, much as they, too, wish they could avoid the topic.

Empowerment versus Fulfilling a "Need"

Let us turn to the first "tension" that actors face in these groups, when they try to act civicly. In contrast to classic voluntary associations, empowerment project organizers try hard to eliminate the distinction between the helper and the recipient:

these organizations have to do double-duty, both to help the needy, and to inspire volunteering. Planners' solution is to say that volunteering cures whatever problems the needy person might have. This approach is considered to be more respectful than the classic volunteers' paternalism. There may be something universal about this way of showing respect: as Molinier (2005) puts it, good care makes itself as invisible as possible, and to give the recipient as much autonomy as possible. What makes this way of showing respect especially potent in empowerment projects is that this implicit sense of tact is now explicitly part of the organizations' mission.

This approach, however, poses a number of its own tensions. First, civic action comes to feel like a kind of vaccine against predictable risks that the volunteer-who-were-also-recipients-of-aid faced. For example, poor and minority youth often said that their volunteer work was good because it kept them out of trouble. At the Children's Fair for Peace, a yearly hybrid-sponsored, local event that was "for peace" (which meant for peace in Kosovo that year), the goals of preventing volunteers' predictable problems mixed with the story about personally inspired voluntarism. Thus, a reporter interviewed some youth for the local news:

> Reporter: Why are you here today?
> Willowy black boy, maybe fourteen years old: I'm involved instead of being out on the streets or instead of taking drugs or doing something illegal.

Youth spoke of themselves as members of categories, and it was as categories that they entered volunteer work, not simply as unique individuals, demonstrating a kind of three-way tension between the groups' "civic" face that honors equality, and its "expert" face (to put it in Boltanski and Thévenot's 1991 terms) that aims to cure youth of the problems that experts predict.

Noticing this puzzling response helped me figure out a typical "perplexing" situation I kept encountering. "Safe Night" was a prophylactically named, hybrid-sponsored evening event for youth (it was supposed to be party of dancing, eating pizza, and playing ping pong for teens, but kids who came ranged from about 7–15 years old). A middle-aged white female volunteer got up in front of the racially mixed group of about one hundred youth, and passed around colored paper cut-outs in the shape of hands (she had about 15 min worth of activities planned). She asked them to write five things—one on each finger—that they could do to serve their community.

Most participants gave the standard, expected answers: "Shovel snow for old people, baby-sit, help at a nursing home, go grocery shopping for someone who can't, help clean up a park." But many black participants said things like "get a job," and "do my homework." This pattern repeated over and over elsewhere; poor and minority kids saying that an after-school program is good because it "keeps me off the street," or "prevents me from smoking or taking drugs," or saying "I can be an example to others, by not going to jail" (direct quotes). Poor and minority youth volunteers knew that they were volunteering as members of "prevention" programs—programs designed in the past 20 years to prevent "at-risk youth" from dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, using drugs, or committing crimes.

An example that ran against the usual current showed just how utterly normal it was for civic action to feel mainly as if it was preventing you, the volunteer, from

becoming a "future problem waiting to be solved, or explode." The example comes from one of Snowy Prairie's ten afterschool programs that were sponsored by an umbrella organization, Casa Latina, for Spanish-speaking middle schoolers. A few times, the paid leader of this program, Laura, encouraged her kids to treat the world as the problem, not just to treat *themselves* as the problem. When I, the other volunteers, and the paid leader of the program heard this interaction, it threw the common sense discourse in sharp relief; the jolt of recognition of the common pattern made us all laugh.

Laura had asked kids to write messages on a banner that she was going to bring to a pro-bicycle, anti-car rally. She had written on it "La Tierra = La Vida" (The Earth = Life) and she also handed out a list of ten incriminating "Facts about the Car"—like pollution, depletion of natural resources, poor working conditions for auto workers, and sprawl. Most of the kids misunderstood her point. They wrote and drew statements like "don't drive drunk," "don't ride a bike drunk," "don't smoke while riding a bike," or even, "ride a bike to lose weight!" Her kids so much did not expect to be asked to say something about the world's problems, they misinterpreted her message. These Latino youth were so accustomed to being treated as "problems," they did not understand Laura. Try as she might, Laura could not break through the pattern that they expected.

Another typical tension caused by collapsing the roles of "volunteer" and "recipient" into one another—the goal of self-transformation for the volunteer and the goal of providing any additional public good, beyond self-transformation for the volunteer—did not always coincide. There was a tension between the need to promote civic equality and to provide paternal, charitable help for the needy (to use Boltanski and Thevenot's terms again, it was a tension between the "civic" and "domestic" faces of the organizations). For example, organizers dreaded having to work with the head of the local food bank, Jennifer Barth. She always insisted on putting the needs of the hungry first, and she had requirements regarding the food that volunteers gathered, such as that the volunteers not gather more than she could distribute or store, that it be non-perishable, nutritious, and so on. In frustration, organizers would say that Jennifer Barth never "got it" that the goal was "democracy," and "letting youth lead." After one meeting, for example, Rob Strauss said, "She's missing the point: it's all about leadership, and democracy." Food and democracy are both important shared problems, but participants were acting as if they could solve them both in one stroke, together.

Finally, treating civic action as a form of therapy for the volunteer made it important for these organizations to attract youth volunteers who were *especially* troubled. The connection, in the American story about volunteering, it that the civic spirit springs from the volunteer's soul, a place deep within, where "the most personal is the most universal" (Emerson 1848). This is not an easy place to find, but organizers assumed that finding it was precisely what could cure troubled teens. However, to attract them, it was important for organizers to *downplay* the soul-changing challenging nature of volunteering, to make participation look like "a no-brainer," in one organizer's frequent words.

For example, a favorite speaker at youth events was a Jamaican musician, a born-again Christian, Ezeki'yel. At one event, he described the inspiration for

volunteering, in the terms given by the day's theme of "leadership." Pacing across the stage, building up a sweat, tossing his clean dreadlocks, he declared:

> Leadership. That's what they want me to talk about. It means taking risks, joy AND pain, risking getting lost. You have to know what it is to be lost. How many of you have been lost? [*Enthusiastic shouting from the audience, as if at a prayer revival meeting*] So you know how it is to be lost. Leadership. It's failing. Failing every day. Leadership. It's sharing—some days it feels like give, give, give… it's a spirit that moves inside you. Nobody can see it, but you know it's there.

This speech was inspiring, but to attract volunteers—and especially troubled teens—organizers quickly had to emphasize how easy civic action was: thus, a few minutes after this speech, the teen leader held a discussion of possible civic actions: gathering cans of food, gathering books, picking up litter ("but do not worry; you do not have to do it on cold days," organizers emphasized), for example.

Transparency for Multiple, Distant, Hurried Audiences

Classic voluntary associations do not need to document their civicness. In contrast, funders of empowerment projects often demand clear evidence that the organization is "civic," according to the funders' definition. Thus, empowerment projects promise to be civic; they have to document and publicize their civic spirit transparently and explicitly.

Using these devices for measuring volunteer work was hard to harmonize with doing the work itself. In the US case, that requires spending a huge amount of time documenting voluntarism: number of volunteer-hours spent volunteering, number of volunteers involved, number of people served, for example. This meant, among other activities in the youth programs, inviting plug-in volunteers to tutor young people, even though the volunteers are destructive. It also requires cultivating relationships that are easy to publicize quickly, to all their multiple, hurried, often distant audiences.

The President's Hundred Hour Challenge is a national program that gives youth volunteers an award for doing 100 h of community service. Voluntarism was measured by the hour, so, measuring volunteer hours is important. In fact, in some groups, more time in meetings is devoted to the question of how to measure the hours spent volunteering than to any other question. In this typical meeting of the Regional Youth Empowerment Project the following discussion about the forms that volunteers are supposed to fill out ensued:

> NGO worker: Would you remember to send it in?
> Some of the eight teens in the meeting answer: No.
> Other adults:What if you got a reminder? What if you forgot to sign the form? Who'll pay for copying and postage? Would it just be an extra burden, after having already done the volunteer work, to have to fill out a form? What if you couldn't find them? How can we distribute them to you? We just want to

> encourage reflection. What if some of your hours didn't get recorded? What if you forgot to send in the sheets? Should there be an event mid-year, to give recognition to youth who've performed fifty hours of service? 30 hours? 20 hours? Who will record this data?

Teens got volunteer hours credit for entering the data about volunteering. If the work was unpleasant, adults let the teens count the hours double. Since some college scholarships also require volunteer work, teen volunteers could get credit for each hour in two different programs at once. And teens got volunteer-hours credit for having these discussions about how to count their volunteer hours.

On the sheets that the groups eventually developed (whose data I entered into a database for youth volunteer work, in my capacity as volunteer for the network of youth programs), there was a little space asking for "reflections." I entered data from over four hundred sheets; in all but three youth volunteers' sheets the "reflection" space was either left blank or there was one word, usually "fun."

Civicness transforms when it bumps into these requirements and accounting devices. Together, they came to form a predictable kind of organization—participants quickly learned how to play this game of hide-and-seek with volunteering and accounting. When one new participant asked if the group was keeping a record of its work in a volunteer project, the others assumed he meant for accounting purposes, and told him that some official was recording their volunteer hours. The new participant had to clarify that he meant it would be good to document their work so they could learn from it, not to count the hours. Devoting so much time and thought to accounting gave a flavor to the civic projects, making all relationships turn at least partly outwards, towards these distant, hurried audiences with their unwieldy measuring devices.

A Tragedy: Openness and Flexibility versus "Family Like" Intimacy

The constant need to document one's organization's civicness created another paradox: Adult volunteers who came to help with homework at Community House one afternoon a week were supposed to be a strong indication that the place had local, grassroots support, and to add to what organizers called the "family like" feel of the places. Their presence was a credit to the organizations; on many grant applications, youth programs had to document adult volunteers' presence, and those that succeeded in attracting volunteers looked good to corporate and government funders. The problem was that almost all of adult volunteers came only one or 2 hours a week, usually only for a few months. These volunteers—we can name them "plug-in volunteers" who are supposed to be able to plug in and out like USB keys, anywhere, anytime—were not only not helpful; they were often destructive.

I observed this, and children and teens in the after-school homework program said so themselves, over and over again; and the organizers also said it: not only were these volunteers not helpful for students who needed help with homework, they often undermined the intimate atmosphere that the paid staff managed to create at certain after-school programs. Paid employees like Community House's Emily

were with their participants every day, sometimes more than 60 h per week in the summer, and some of them for many years at a stretch. Emily knew their teachers, knew what each one was doing in school, and how well, knew who each one's boyfriend or girlfriend was at every moment, knew their parents; she even knew how fast her kids' hair grew. Such paid employees' constancy and relative permanence contrasted with the instant intimacy that volunteers sought.

Some examples show the difficulties of helping on such a limited time budget: members of the homework programs got contradictory advice on homework each day of the week, or even each hour, from different volunteers. Volunteers had almost no familiarity with any individual child; this made it hard for volunteers to interpret any specific young person's complaints about schoolwork and teachers—or even to grasp their assignments. As a typical volunteer "homework helper," for example, I often found myself having to undo advice that the Tuesday's volunteer had given, who had, herself, contradicted Monday's volunteer's advice; and then coming back a week later to un-do a new set of contradictory advice, that another random list of volunteers had given, for a two-week-long project.

A typical day shows this: at various times throughout the afternoon, volunteers Keith, Josh, and I help eleven year old Jeannette with her homework. Jeannette's homework assignment was to write "Imagine you are a Loyalist, Patriot, or Undecided, in the War of Independence. How has the war changed your life?" I helped her on it today (Keith did, too), someone else helped the day before, and yet a fourth person will help tomorrow. Yesterday's volunteer (probably trying to make the material "relevant" to Jeannette, who was black) suggested that she write about Crispus Attucks—okay, but she did not know what side of the war Crispus Attucks was on. If she wrote it from the point of view of an actual, historical person, she had have to make up inaccurate facts or else learn something about Crispus Attucks, and that is not the teacher's assignment. So I tried to convince her to follow the assignment directly: just make up a story about someone imaginary, who was either "Loyalist, Patriot, or Undecided."

Jeannette had been worrying all afternoon that her grandma was going to just leave if she was not standing outside waiting for her. (Her grandmother just recently claimed custody of her, and is not eager to have an eleven year old again, according to Emily.) Jeannette is a really poor reader, and the ancient encyclopedia at Community House had a lot of big words and awkward metaphors. Frankly, the tutoring was not going too well. Keith, a university student majoring in Political Science and History, took my place when I had to go make a phone call. When I came back, he had already contradicted the advice I had given Jeannette fifteen minutes earlier. Jeannette was receiving a wealth of help, but in a mess of bits and pieces that did not add up to a coherent whole. Even in math, which might seem easier to morsel-ize, I often heard volunteers asking, for example, "Well, has your class learned the Pythagorean Theorem yet? Then what have you learned, that could help you solve this?" or "You could do it this way, but I don't know if you've learned that [axiom, or operation, or formula] yet."

Usually, students who were not studious would claim not to have learned anything, and then, they would just run around the room. So, plug-in volunteers, most of them seeking a rewarding experience, would literally run towards the table

where the studious girls sat. Volunteers did not try to make the less studious teens do their homework. An alternative, with disruptive participants, was for the plug-in volunteer to give up on making them do homework and try to "forge an emotional bond" with them. Sometimes, this meant trying to make young people talk about their lives, but then the volunteers often did not have a clue about what it was like to have an uncle in jail and a parent who violated parole—to take one among many examples of bonding efforts gone awry—so the volunteer would quickly, nervously try to change the topic.

When policy analysts criticize governments for allowing for-profit agencies to provide education or social services, they call this "picking the lowest hanging fruit"—admitting only the students who will be cheap to educate, for example, or patients whose problems are easy to fix and not chronic, and dumping the expensive problem people onto government-funded schools and hospitals. But here, the goal is not money; the goal is a meaningful experience, as it often is in these new forms of volunteering (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003).

Ironically, using the presence of adult volunteers as proof-positive of the program's grassroots "civicness" created a rather uncivic situation in which studious young people got help, and unstudious young people got ignored or encouraged in their avoidance of homework. Thus, when they actually wanted to get their homework done, the four studious girls at Community House found a way to hide from the overly chatty plug-in volunteers. They would go hide in a slightly moldy-smelling basement room, and close the door. In other after-school programs, however, there was no place to hide.

Imagine the alternatives to allowing volunteers to pick the "lowest fruit," and to ignore the difficult ones: assigning kids to volunteers, no matter how personally incompatible they felt, and no matter how discouraging and impossible it seemed to help kids whom they felt unequipped to help? Requiring training for volunteers? The organizations offered it once a year, but requiring it would take too much time, and might discourage volunteers who had only a few hours a month. The empowerment projects' permanent openness and flexibility was hard to mesh with the mission of creating a family like feeling of comfort and intimacy.

The organizations' commitment to multiculturalism confronted the same tension. Openness is part of what we usually mean when we say "civic." Empowerment projects *had* to be open, and document their openness. These American projects had to have a method for documenting their openness, for those hurried audiences. However, only the *right kind* of cultural tradition could count—deep "roots" had to be exposable, publicly acceptable, approved: sexist or exclusive traditions could not count, and traditions that were hard to explain quickly could not count. That eliminated pretty much all traditions. Still, almost every public event was "a celebration of our diverse, multicultural community" and included food and clothes from around the world. Here again, as in the scenario in which plug-in volunteers undermined the intimate atmosphere that Emily created at Community House, a deep familiarity—this time, with a culture's habits and traditions—was hard to publicize quickly, to distant, hurried audiences.

Connection to Politics and Policy-Making

While nothing prevents classic voluntary associations from discussing social statistics, these hybrid organizations have to muster them, for funding purposes. For example, organizers tried to keep participants on equal footing, but since some of the youth programs' funding came from prevention grants for at-risk youth—since, that is, the programs existed to redress inequalities—seemingly distant social science statistics easily infused face-to-face interaction. African American adults often start public speeches with heartfelt litanies of grim statistics—school drop out rates, incarceration rates, poverty rates, unemployment rates, illiteracy rates, single parenthood rates, teen pregnancy rates—and end the speeches with rousing calls to boost graduation and voting rates.

At an annual Martin Luther King Day event, a black speaker devoted half of his speech to statistics. He spoke passionately. At the end, he said that if you wanted to learn more, you could read a book, and he held the book up. So, when young people were asked to speak "from their own experience" and then offered statistics, it just sounded like a mistake, like at this Juneteenth celebration,[2] in which a black 13-year-old school boy was supposed to give a "personal testimony" and said: "Most blacks can't control themselves because they have such low expectations on them. There is a 50% dropout rate, so the community makes it tough for black males like me. It's very tough to get off that thing they set up for us." Learning about the drop-out rates can help someone like this boy see how he fits into the world. Even if he spoke of himself as a "black male," with the clinical scent it bears, at least it went with a publicly shared language of statistics. Sociologists might be proud. So why is it jarring?

When speaking out publicly, youth's words were supposed to be "from the mouths of babes," not full of measurement, tests, and statistics. Messages about statistics and inequality were emphatically *not* the messages that most white organizers wanted young people to learn. They chafed at this approach, wanting to leave the past behind and for all races to be treated as already equal. The organizers wanted something more grassroots, personal; they wanted empowerment talk, not statistics. But young people eagerly scanned the institutions for signs of where they stood; teens quickly developed an institutional intuition about the settings, even while adults tried hard to deflect attention from the institutional medium in which they operate. Participants—adults and youth alike—quickly develop a "stock of experience" that is, in fact, the experience of institutions, as Dewey (1926, 1938) would argue.[3] That is, when asked to "draw on their own experience," to dream up projects on which their hybrid service groups should work, the youth's dreams often were of organizations that already existed and about which they already knew, from their work within these hybrid youth programs.

[2] Juneteenth celebrates the freeing of African American slaves in Texas; the news of freedom did not arrive in Texas until two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. This is another of those newly popularized holidays in the US, like Earth Day, Cesar Chavez Day, and Cinco de Mayo.

[3] This is not the usual reception of Dewey's work in the US. Dewey's work is usually treated as being about individuals' direct experience, in contrast against their experience in institutional settings.

For example, in one evening meeting of the Regional Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), participants were asked to generate a list of issues that they wanted to see addressed in workshops during Martin Luther King Day that would embody the spirit of King's messages. The teens named semi-state, semi-NGO, semi-volunteer organizations like the Regional YEP: an AIDS prevention organization, an anti-smoking agency, anti-drug organizations, juvenile justice and parole programs, another disease prevention program, programs for school drop-outs, domestic violence programs, and other nonprofit and government-sponsored social service youth programs. Here, they were thinking about society through the "medium of the organizations" (Joas 1996). No one named political parties, activist organizations, religious institutions, causes, principles, or ideas. When asked to "draw on your own experience," participants did just that: they drew on their experience as participants in empowerment projects. That *was* the direct experience, not the local feelings of daily service that de Tocqueville described, and not the vast, oceanic feeling of drawing on deep, inner-experience that Emerson, Addams, and the others treat as the roots of good volunteering.

Concluding Comments: The Worry

For some American politicians and analysts, government funding of voluntarism raises a specter of political domination. In the words of a prominent nonprofit executive, speaking at the moment about 35 years ago that government funding for local, voluntary associations began to spiral upwards: "Truly voluntary associations are desperately needed for the revitalization of the democratic process, but they cannot be supported by government funds since government funding immediately contaminates their nature and is self defeating" (Bertram Beck cited in Smith and Lipsky 1993, p. 57). The executive here is worried that these informal organizations lose ground when grassroots groups have to jockey for funding from the government or from big NGOs whose headquarters are in Washington, DC. On the opposite pole is the story that adults in Snowy Prairie tell: of infinite freedom, flexibility, openness, the ability to break out of boxes. But neither pole is correct.

As sociologist Michael Schudson (1998) wryly observes, Americans like the prominent nonprofit executive have been bemoaning the "loss of community" at least since 1621. Thus, in the nonprofit executive's eyes, it might look as if volunteerism is being ground down till it fits into an accounting ledger, in a procrustean bed that kills the civic spirit. Conversely, local organizers imagine that these organizations really are creating the same kind of civicness that classic volunteer groups inspired. Neither pole is quite right, so, the interesting question does not demand a yes or a no, but a "how." In these hybrid organizations, people are trying to blend civic engagement, family-like closeness, government, nonprofit bureaucracy, and other moral worlds; none simply loses or gains ground: rather, the ground changes.

In the American organizers' hopes, civic action's "home turf" is the voluntary association (Friedland and Alford 1991), where it is supposed to be rooted in direct personal experience, soul-changing, free in both senses of the word—both

"costless" and "unconstrained." Volunteering, in this common sense definition, is not directed from the top-down, not funded, and therefore, does not need to justify itself to any public beyond itself. Voluntary associations, according to this common sense ideal, capture average citizens' wisdom, as it bubbles up from the deep-spring of personal, lived experience, before this living wisdom becomes tainted by institutions.

Nobody in the hybrid organizations could, however, avoid noticing that volunteering was not free, in either sense of the word. Organizing spontaneous voluntary participation took money and careful advance planning. They kept using the words "volunteer" and "civic association" and "participation" in these conditions, thus subtly but implacably changing the words' everyday meanings. In their new uses, they make sense within the constellation that participants easily recognize as one of those entities that I am calling empowerment projects that are now spanning the globe. Implicitly, while this paper cannot spin out the entire argument, it suggests that the empowerment project is, thus, a newly prevalent constellation on our social firmament; people connect the stars in predictable, patterned ways. They are as predictable (yet varied) as the previous two centuries' organizational innovations—"the voluntary association," "the bureaucracy," and "the enterprise."

Seeing the distinctions outlined in this paper are especially urgent now, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate "the state" and its fulfillment of rights. In many nations, the state is devolving into "public–private partnerships," and outsourcing social service provision to community-based organizations. Smith and Lipsky's *Nonprofits for Hire* (1993), for example, painstakingly records a hundred year span of local provision of care in Massachusetts, for children, youth, old people, sick people, and mentally ill or disabled people (in other words, nearly everyone, at some point in life). Their book shows that in the new "contracting regime" of the past 40 years or so, nonprofit agencies have become more and more in charge of distributing government funds to these people. These projects often refuse funds to local projects that do not have "a civic engagement component," as public administrators often put it. And so, these projects often include cultivating the grassroots from the top-down, "*making* the public participate" (Carrel 2004).

These state agencies around the world are haunted by the image of the distant bureaucrat, and they are aiming to do something different: to empower grassroots, local, multicultural, optional, voluntary communities, to help people break out of their boxes and express their gut feelings, in empowerment projects. Empowerment talk raises the hope and expectation that the organizations of participatory democracy can, and should, break-down borders between public and private, between state, market, and family. The goal—both yesterday and today—has been to bring government "closer to the people," and to encourage the people to govern themselves. But in the process of handing government's job to volunteers and nongovernmental organizations, both the nature of "government" and the nature of "civic associations" change. This paper has focused on the latter.

Paradoxically, when organizations make these promises, they are heeding the critiques that sociologists have long made (as Steinmetz 2005, has noted with irony). When they do so, in ways that are accountable to their multiple audiences, on

the short time-frame of the typical empowerment project, they will encounter the tensions described in this paper. Instead of learning the lessons that organizers wanted them to learn, participants were learning some other very valuable lessons: how to navigate this increasingly prevalent web of hybrid organizations; how to hear, and then quickly ignore, the plug-in volunteers' lavish promises; how to create instant intimacy with people whom they had no expectation of ever seeing again; and, how to represent their traditional cultures in innocuous ways to people who would not have the time to learn anything about them. These are valuable lessons but not the inspiring lessons that the organizers had in mind. They are, however, valuable for employment in the fast-pace world of short-term employment and networking; they are valuable, also, for deciphering the puzzles of active citizenship in a society with an elusive, scrambled state.

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